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Spies vs. Spies: Tale of 2 Embassies

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Shortly after the first American ambassador arrived in Moscow in 1933, Stalin asked him over dinner whether there was anything he could do for him. Yes, the envoy, William C. Bullitt, replied, he would like "that lovely bluff overlooking the Moscow River" for an embassy site.

Stalin agreed, and so began what today may be the oldest unfinished business in Soviet-American relations.

An embassy was eventually built, though far from the site Mr. Bullitt had requested. But critics now say that the building is too infested with electronic bugs to be usable. And in Washington, the Russians are barred by agreement from moving into their new embassy until the Americans move into theirs.

Mr. Bullitt evidently sought the property on Lenin Hills — today the site of Moscow University and government guest lodges — for the panorama of Moscow. He hoped to build a residence patterned on Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's estate in Virginia.

A History of Embassy Project

The Ambassador is unlikely to have anticipated the technological advances in electronic espionage that would have made such a high site lucrative. This vignette is among several that emerge from a history of the embassy project prepared several years ago by Culver Gleysteen, a Foreign Service officer, now retired.

One of the charges being aired in Washington is that the new Soviet Embassy there occupies high ground, while the American structure in Moscow is low. Mr. Gleysteen recalls not only that the Americans could have had the high site, but also that it was the State Department that pressed the reluctant Russians to take the high site in Washington.

Mr. Gleysteen, who served three tours of duty in the Soviet Union between 1950 and 1974, prepared his study in 1978 out of concern that the roots of the embassy project were fading into obscurity. His conclusion at the time was that "a mid-1982 completion date would seem optimistic."

New Housing Already Occupied

It proved optimistic, indeed. American diplomats began moving into new housing in the compound only last year. But the chancery is not ready for occupancy, and 52 years after Mr. Bullitt first cabled Washington that a new embassy was in the national interest and won appropriations for it, American

diplomats still work out of their present cramped chancery in a leased building.

In broad outline, the history of the project parallels the ups and downs of Soviet-American relations. The negotiations initiated by Ambassador Bullitt stalled and were revived only in the 1950's.

In the meantime, the American Embassy first occupied a building next to the National Hotel looking toward Red Square. And in 1952, the United States accepted a Soviet offer of the present premises, a nine-story building on Tchaikovsky Street, which is a section of the Ring Road around central Moscow. The ambassador at the time, George F. Kennan, accepted the offer, Mr. Gleysteen writes, because the site was reasonably central and close to the ambassador's residence, Spaso House.

The choice was probably a mistake, Mr. Gleysteen writes. The embassy quickly outgrew the building, and by the 1960's, he said, it "had probably become the worst Foreign Service office building anywhere, certainly for any major post."

In Washington, meanwhile, the Russians were also in the market for a new embassy. They had outgrown the building they inherited from the czarist period on 16th Street N.W. and were shopping for a bigger property.

Their search met resistance from property owners who feared the effect of Communist neighbors on real estate values.

A Soviet attempt to buy a property called Bonnie Brae in the Chevy Chase area ran into opposition from residents. A subsequent bid to buy an estate called Treganon in Cleveland Park, Mr. Gleysteen wrote, was opposed by J. Edgar Hoover, the F.B.I. director, who lived nearby.

Finally, the State Department pressed the Russians to accept a Government-owned property on Wisconsin Avenue that had been vacated by the Veterans Administration. Mr. Gleysteen said intelligence agencies had no objection to locating the Soviet Embassy on the site, an elevation known as Mount Alto.

Soviet Long Resisted Site

Yet as late as 1971, the Soviet Embassy resisted the site, on the ground that it was distant from the center and hard to secure against harassment, like that of the Jewish Defense League.

In Moscow, the Soviet Government offered the Americans a site behind the existing embassy that was slated for

urban renewal. Though it has been described as a low-lying "swamp," it is in fact no swamper than any other part of Moscow.

The discussion of sites got under way in 1959 when Nikita S. Khrushchev came to the United States.

But with the shooting down of the American U-2 spy plane, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the war in Vietnam, bureaucratic wrangling and disputes over the shape and value of lots, agreement was not reached until 10 years later.

It called for matching 85-year leases, the Soviet Embassy for the 12.5-acre Mount Alto site, and the Americans for the 10-acre embassy site and the 1.8-acre plot of Spaso House.

Then began even more involved negotiations over construction, ranging from importing construction materials to the duration of the lease, the height of the respective chanceries and control over the site during construction.

Russians Hired U.S. Architect

The Russians had a lesser problem, since they hired an American architect and an American construction concern. In the Soviet Union, the sole building contractor is the Soviet Government.

In the end, Mr. Gleysteen said, the agreement gave the Russians control over basic construction, and the Americans control over plumbing, electrical and other finishing work — a noteworthy fact in light of recent complaints that the Russians imbedded their bugs into prefabricated concrete sections cast off-site.

The agreement was finally signed in December 1974, Mr. Gleysteen wrote, "39 years after Ambassador Bullitt took up the issue with Stalin and 13 years after the Soviet accepted our initiative to revive it." That was 12 years ago.